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Jennings, William Beatty

A sermon, "Jeremiah's real estate purchase"

[Philadelphia]

[1916]

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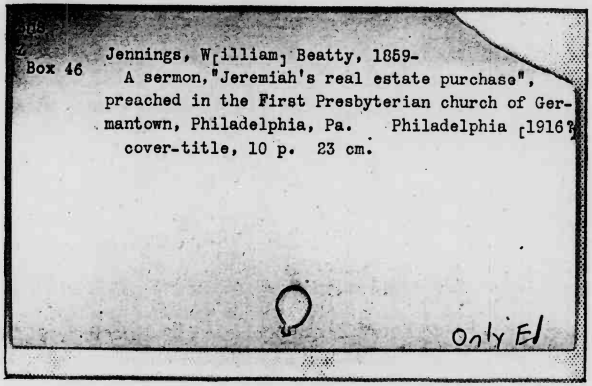
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A Sermon

"Jeremiah's Real Estate Purchase"

Preached in the

First Presbyterian Church of Germantown
Philadelphia, Pa.

By

W. Beatty Jennings

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JEREMIAH'S REAL ESTATE PURCHASE.

Jer. 32:9—"I bought the field that was in Anathoth of Hanamel mine uncle's son, and weighed him the money, even seventeen sheckels of silver."

Jerusalem was beseiged by the Chaldean Army. Jeremiah was in prison—"in the court of the guard"—flung there because he had foretold the disastrous end of the seige, the overthrow of the city and the removal of its King to distant Babylon. Though confined and probably with chains on his ankles, the prophet was allowed to see his friends, the prison-life being in this respect very like that of the Marshelsea, which Dickens describes for us in Little Dorrit.

Among those who came to him was Hanamel, a cousin, who wished to sell him a certain piece of property—a field—in Anathoth. What the owner's motive was in wishing to sell the land we are not told. But under Jewish law members of the family had the right to purchase property which was to be sold before it was offered to strangers. Hanamel therefore, in accordance with the law, offered the piece of land to his first cousin Jeremiah. In some way the prophet had learned of Hanamel's intention to sell, and therefore was not taken by surprise when the offer was made. Promptly he bought the field, and the conveyance was made with due observance of all legal forms. Particular care was given to the preservation of the deed of transfer, for though the city would fall and all its property—all the property of the nation for that matter—would be confiscated, yet Jeremiah believed firmly that at the end of the period of captivity God would fulfil His promise and restore Israel to its own country. Indeed, in asking for the safe keeping of the record he says, "For thus saith Jehovah of Hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall yet again be bought in this land." Immediately upon closing this transaction Jeremiah betakes himself to communion with God in prayer, laying before Him the fact of his purchase and his reasons therefor. The prayer is given in full in this chapter, and is followed by God's answer, in which Jehovah repeats the assurance of the speedy fall of the nation and His pledge of its later restoration.

This is the interesting story of a very suggestive real estate transaction.

I. Here is a man who dared to be true to God's law, as that law is related to matters of property, though it was seemingly bad business policy. A cynic might say that the case is so rare that it merits special study.

Mark you, Jeremiah knew that the city was bound to fall in a few days at the longest. It may be that from his prison window he could, as one suggests, see something of the beseiging armies and their operations. Certainly he learned from his many visitors the progress of the seige. He knew full well that the Chaldeans were working successfully, pushing their mounds and engines nearer the gates, digging their mines beneath the walls. He knew, too, that famine and pestilence within the city were growing rapidly more and more deadly. Jerusalem was already virtually in the enemy's hands. There was not one ray of hope. He was well aware that the moment the enemy triumphed all property, lands, houses, money, would be summarily appropriated by the victors and all rights of ownership would be annulled. What utter folly then, from any sane business consideration, to buy property in or near Jerusalem! And yet, Jeremiah had become in some way convinced that God would have him buy that field in Anathoth. This was intimated in the earliest stage of the story. "Jeremiah said, the word of Jehovah came unto me, saying, Behold, Hanamel, the son of Shallum, thine uncle shall come unto thee, saying, Buy my field that is in Anathoth: for the right of redemption is thine to buy it." And it is plainly affirmed at the close of the prayer: "Thou hast said unto me, O Lord Jehovah, buy thee the field for money, and call witnesses; whereas the city is given into the hand of Chaldeans." So when his cousin entered the prison and asked Jeremiah to buy this particular bit of land and keep it in the family, preserve the family inheritance intact, he did it promptly and with nicest regard to all the forms of law. How long the interval between the intimation of Hanamel's coming and the actual interview was we do not know. But whether short or long it was a time of anxiety and temptation to the prophet. He might easily have persuaded himself that

Hanamel was trying to load off his estate on another before it was too late and so save himself from loss; or he might have argued that these land-laws were made for times of peace and surely were not binding in the moment of national overthrow and destruction of all property rights; or he might at least have hesitated to make the purchase until the issue of the seige was determined. But no! the decision is reached —*this* is the will of God. So immediately upon Hanamel's proposal of sale Jeremiah purchases the field. God's will and sane finance—the thing that is right and sound business policy —how often they seem to be far separated, even to conflict! The Bible and conscience saying "This is the right thing, do it!" All a man's business foresight and all his knowledge of business methods declaring "But it is utter foolhardiness!" A conviction of right contesting with a sure forecast of loss. O! it is a hard place for a man to be put into! God pity and help the man who is so placed! And I know full well, and God knows, that it is just this awful embarrassment in which you men of affairs often find yourselves. It may be that this is just your harassing position in your business affairs at the beginning of this new year. To do the right may threaten you with certain money loss. To be true may be to fail. What shall you do? O, my Brother, is your faith in God and in the ultimate triumph of right equal to the test? Do you believe that if right is right and God is God the right is sure to win? Then make the great venture of faith. Dare to be true to God and what you believe to be right though it seemingly may be the worst possible business policy!

II. Studying this real estate deal from another point of view it discovers to us a man who, instead of brooding over his business difficulties in their relation to the right, did the right and then took his business difficulties to God in prayer. We are warranted in thinking that this was Jeremiah's course. There is no record of a prayer *before* the purchase was effected. He seems to have seen very clearly that there was only one *right* thing. Difficulties hedged it in, it is true. But over these he trod with quick step, suffering the pain which they inflicted, and simply did the thing which ought to be done. *Then* he resorted to prayer, and asked for the explanation of the difficulties.

It is a wonderful prayer as recorded in the story. "Its character," another remarks, "and the way in which Jeremiah seeks relief from God, are deeply significant. He does not begin by asking the meaning of the command that he has obeyed. Most of his prayer contains no reference to this. It is devoted to a contemplation of God, of His nature, His grace, the justice even of His severe actions." The prayer has been analyzed thus: "He thinks upon the *greatness* of God as manifested in the stupendous works of nature. Surely God, who has done such wondrous things, will find no difficulty in bringing His will to pass in other matters. Yet even in nature is much that is mysterious. Why be surprised at mystery here? Then he contemplates the wisdom and goodness of God, and concludes that in the light of these characteristics no command of His can be unreasonable or unkind. Next he reviews the providence of God and finds that He was ever true to His word and brought those who trusted Him safely out of their distress. Yes, and yet further, God in His severest actions has never been unjust or unmerciful and can always be trusted. Then, it concludes with a confession of perplexity at the divine command which he has obeyed. This, however, *follows* the long contemplation of the character and works of God—the very contemplation itself having prepared his heart for God's answer." Then comes the explanation from Jehovah, with its assurance that all will be well, and its abounding comfort.

Is there not here for you, my Brothers, direction, the direction of experience and example? Here is the right thing demanding to be done by you. But it is hedged about with difficulties and embarrassments. It may be right, it *is* right, but it is bad business. It involves tremendous property risk and seeming probability of loss. What is to be done? PRAY about it. Every business matter ought to be taken in prayer to God. Why go to God with purely religious concerns and leave business interests out of our prayers? A man's life can not be divided into water-tight compartments in any such fashion. Consecration is the giving of self to God in all or not at all. Business and religion are just as much related as church-going and religion. Business will never be redeemed from its hardness, its shameful competition, its sordidness

until it is conducted prayerfully. And the Christian man can never hope for the blessing of God upon his business life until he takes his aims, plans, methods, the intricate involutions of his everyday affairs to God in prayer. But, shall these perplexities that surround the right deed be first *taken* to God for explanation and the deed allowed to remain undone until the answer comes? Or shall the right be done, promptly, fully, truthfully, and then recourse be had to prayer? Surely the latter is the better course. Do the right, though it seem bad business, and then seek relief from embarrassment and doubt by communion with God. I say deliberately by communion, rather than prayer in the commonly accepted sense of the word. For it is in the contemplation of God's character and in listening to His words of love to us that the difficulties of life and its perplexities sink into insignificance compared with the profit and the pure joy of doing the right.

III. As we look yet more deeply into this land purchase we find an example of heroism as great as any in the pages of history. While I have been speaking you have recalled, no doubt, the conduct of certain Romans, about whom Livy tells us. When Hannibal encamped only three miles from Rome, and when his former victories made it probable that he would take the city, the very ground he occupied was sold in the forum at public auction and fetched a good price. Such was the faith of the Romans in the strength of the Eternal City and the power of its armies, and such was the courage of their own souls. But was theirs any greater than Jeremiah's splendid heroism manifested here? Let me remind you again that Jerusalem was in the last stages of a prolonged and desperate seige. She could not possibly hold out more than a few days. There was absolutely no prospect of relief from any quarter save above, and God had declared its fall and the transportation of its inhabitants to distant Babylon. And Jeremiah knew the callous cruelty of the Chaldean soldiers, knew that havoc and slaughter awaited them, knew that all the property would be seized and appropriated by the invaders. And yet, knowing all this, he dared to buy new land, and weighed out for it the little money that he had and then saw carefully to the record of the transaction. It was heroism

indeed, the heroism of faith. Jeremiah's name, because of this one deed, is worthy to be enrolled in that register of heroes which is preserved in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. And what were his motives? They are two, I think. Altruism, a regard for others, moved the prophet to this seemingly foolhardy trade. The people of the city and the country were depressed and despairing. They were sinners, great and long-time sinners, before God, and their sacred laws told them the divine displeasure against sin. For years the prophet—spokesman for God—had told them the sure and severe punishment for their evil doings which awaited them. And now the penalty was at hand. Overthrow, captivity, was upon them. The whole people were in hopeless distress. True, words of gracious promise had been mingled with the threats of doom; but these were forgotten. The night was starless. It was to inspire hope and faith in these despairing citizens, to turn their thoughts to the great God and His promises of pardon and restoration that Jeremiah bought this field in Anathoth. It was an avowance in deed—so much more effective than any declaration in word—of his faith in Jehovah and His word of grace. Had he refused to buy that bit of ground in time of seige it would have been a confession of his own unfaith. It would have negatived the influence of his whole life. It would have confirmed the city in its hopelessness and wretchedness. But, though it was bad business Jeremiah bought the land and paid his precious silver for it. Bought the land and provided for the secure preservation of the deed. Instantly it was bruited throughout the city "The prophet has bought land in Anathoth. Truly he believes that Jehovah is with us still and will restore us and our children to our possessions. The night will pass, the day will surely come!" Is it not possible for you men of affairs so to conduct your business as to relieve the despair of better times, the almost hopelessness of any good living which has settled down upon many, upon the majority of our people to-day? Is it not possible for you to make even your methods of finance and your commercial transactions minister to brotherliness and goodwill? Beyond this, Jeremiah's motive was also religious. There is an altruism apart from the precepts and sanctions of religion, a regard for others that has in it none of the spirit of God. Such was not the

prophet's. Anathoth was one of the cities of the priests, and this field was church property. It might well be, therefore, that, unless Jeremiah bought it, it would in those confused times pass into other hands, by which it would become alienated from its sacred purposes, and so the interests of the religion of Johovah would suffer. That paper of record was really a deed to the kingdom of God. To-day the religion of Jesus Christ, handed down to us from our fathers for ourselves and our children, is our most precious heritage and our incomparable asset. The Church of Jesus Christ is the embodiment, the guardian, the promoter of this religion, the pillar, and ground, and dispenser of divine truth. The interests of our families, our city, our nation are wrapped up with the safety and the progress of Christianity. Is it not possible for you men and women, to whom God has entrusted large wealth, by your investment and use of it, even though to the men of the world it may seem poor business and even reckless expenditure, to buy up some of the imperilled interests and to safeguard some of the influence and power of the Church?

O, my Brothers, will you not encourage yourselves to right doing, even when it is seeming folly, by the heroic examples of others—of business men of the past and of our own day—for there are plenty of heroes in the annals of business—who have shown themselves splendidly courageous for the right. Conduct your private business not for solely individual—selfish—ends, but for the advancement of the interests of your fellow-men and the good of Christian religion. Business carried on altruistically and religiously is an open field for the display of herosim unsurpassed by anything in the annals of history. God's call is for heroes of faith in the realm of finance!

Let me conclude this study of Jeremiah's real estate deal by the announcement of its great underlying principle: That the sacrifice of material interests for interests purely spiritual, the loss of the present for the sake of the future—though it may be worldly folly—is the highest wisdom. The barter of our treasures of gold and silver and gems, our treasures of hours and days and years, for the betterment of others and the progress of the Church of God is sanest business policy, is the investment of our goods in the coming kingdom and the Eternal City of God. For none less knowing of the future and none

less true to us than Christ Himself has said, "I swear unto you, that every one that hath left house * * * or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundred fold and shall inherit eternal life."

O, who is foolish-wise enough to venture upon this word of Christ and in self-sacrifice lay up treasures in Heaven? Where are the heroes of faith?

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